

Ironie Trust

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Summary: The Arbiter saves the life of Loren, a young recruit under Johnson, only to have her turn around and save him. Can she and the elite form a friendship despite the lack of trust between their races?

1. Chapter 1 First Contact

****Disclaimer: ****I can only dreamâ€|.

Ironie Trust

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Chapter one: First Contact

Loren trekked through the woods with her team, sweating profusely under her burdensome armor. Her assault rifle felt heavy in her hands, and Commander Johnson's long strides did not falter. It seemed like hours since their Pelican had dropped them in this godforsaken jungle, yet when she checked her watch, barely fifteen minutes had passed. Now, after several months of training, she still hadn't seen a single enemy Covenant.

"_Commander Johnson," _ her helmet radio crackled, _"Master Chief jumped from the Forerunners ship." _

"Yeah, what about it?" Johnson stopped and wiped his dark brow with the back of his hand.

"_He was two kilometers above the ground." _

Johnson swore, the first look of anxiety Loren had ever seen flashing over his face. "Two kilometers â€|?"

"_He landed just north of your area, but he hasn't checked in," _the voice continued. _"Plainly, I'm worried." _

"We'll find him," Johnson said. He lit one of his ever present cigarettes. "Johnson out." For a second, he stood silently, thoughtfully puffing on the cigarette. In one motion, he dropped it and ground it under his boot. "Where's the Arbiter?"

The air beside Loren moved, and she jumped and stepped quickly back. A soldier beside her, Mark, she noted darkly, snickered.

"I am here," a deep, disembodied voice spoke.

Loren glared at the shifting air for a moment before glancing away. The way the Arbiter could make himself invisible was downright creepy.

"Listen," Johnson began, and then interrupted himself irritably. "Make yourself visible; I don't like talking to thin air."

The Arbiter obeyed wordlessly, materializing into his towering seven foot height.

"When we find him, stay back," Johnson continued. "I don't want him pasting you before I can tell him not to."

The Arbiter snorted but said nothing, swiftly vanishing back into nothingness.

"All right, soldiers," Johnson said, clicking the safety off his assault rifle, "Fan out north, and find the Chief, and keep an eye out for Covenant. Loren, you stay with me. The rest off you, stay in seeing distance of one another. Mark, stick with the Arbiter."

"Permission to speak, sir," Mark piped up.

"Permission granted," Johnson said.

"How can I stay with him when I can't see him?"

Johnson sighed and glanced in the direction of the Arbiter.

The Arbiter growled and reappeared. "I do not like being a watcher of your inexperienced."

"Fine, then," Johnson replied with annoyance. "He can come with me if you're going to act like a grouch."

The Arbiter turned and stalked away, muttering, "Humans."

Mark glanced between him and Johnson in momentary confusion.

The Arbiter glanced back at him impatiently. "Come, boy."

With a microscopic shrug, Mark followed.

The group split up, and Loren found herself struggling once again to keep up with Johnson's long strides.

"Have you ever met the Master Chief?" Johnson asked her as he slung his rifle over his back and hacked through a patch of vines with his

machete.

She shook her head, eyes roving about as she watched for any sign of Covenant presence. "No, sir, but I've seen him several times from a distance." She hesitated then continued. "Everyone that I've talked with who has worked with him seems to idolize him. Is he really that good?"

"Yep," Johnson said. He sheathed the knife and grabbed his assault rifle again. His face darkened. "For the sakes of all of us on Earth, we'd better hope he didn't. The Arbiter's good, but without Master Chief, I doubt his ability to give us the aid we need."

"Why did he jump from the Forerunner ship?" Loren asked, still doubtful that anyone so highly esteemed could do something so stupid.

"I have no idea," he said with a frown. "I wonder what in the blazes caused him to jump at two kilometers."

"_Commander, we've found him." _It was Mark, and he sounded unusually subdued.

"How is he?" Johnson demanded. "Where are you?"

"We're two hundred meters north of you, sir," came the reply.

"I'll be there in a minute," Johnson said. "Come on, Loren." He broke into a jog, and Loren forced her tired legs to follow.

They reached the spot before the rest of the team, and as promptly as they appeared, the Arbiter vanished. Mark, sitting on the ground with a compact laptop before him, started as the imposing figure at his side abruptly disappeared, and Loren was about to pay him back for his snicker, when she saw Master Chief. He lay immovable on the ground, green armored arms held bizarrely up in the air. His face was covered by his helmet, and the trees above reflected on the gold tinted visor.

"Report," Johnson asked, concern filling his face as he leaned over him.

"His armor's locked," Mark replied, hitting a few random keys. "But the gel layer seemed to take a good deal of the fall."

Johnson touched something on Master Chief's helmet, and the Spartan's arms sank down to his sides.

"I'm afraid it doesn't look too good, sir," Mark admitted.

Johnson said nothing, but leaned in close and studied Master Chief's visor carefully, another cigarette somehow finding its way to his lips. The rest of the team filed into the area silently.

Finally, he reached forward and pulled something small and thin, almost like a computer chip, from the back of Master Chief's helmet. He rocked back on his heels and stood. Turning to a soldier, he ordered, "Send for heavy transport, we aren't leaving him here."

"No," Loren's head snapped around as Master Chief reached up and grasped Johnson's arm, "you're not."

Johnson's face lit up, and he helped Master Chief stand. "Crazy fool!" he exclaimed. "Why do you always jump? Someday you'll land on something as stubborn as you are, and I don't do bits and pieces."

Master Chief did not reply, but reached for the computer chip in Johnson's hand.

Johnson handed it over, his face growing abruptly serious again. "Chief," he asked softly, "where's Cortana?"

"She remained behind," the Spartan replied his tone quiet. He slipped the chip back into his helmet.

Out of the corner of her eye, Loren saw the gel like section of air move as the Arbiter shifted his position.

Master Chief froze. Suddenly, he grabbed Johnson's pistol from his holster and, shoving the commander aside, sprang forward with a dexterity that seemed to be beyond someone with his stature and armor.

Apparently, it took the Arbiter by surprise also, for he only had time to make himself perceptible as Master Chief's pistol rested on his neck.

"Wait, Chief!" Johnson shouted. "The Arbiter's with us!"

The pistol did not move. Master Chief's expressionless visor stared up at the Arbiter's face, tension rippling through the air. The Arbiter stood motionless, almost as if he wished the other would pull the trigger, his gaze locked with the Chief's.

"Take it easy," Johnson said, his voice sharp. "We have enough to worry about without you two trying to kill each other."

"If only it were so easy," the Arbiter hissed as Master Chief reluctantly lowered the pistol. The menace in his voice caused a shiver to run down Loren's spine.

Johnson held an assault rifle out to Master Chief. "Come on, we have a job to do."

Master Chief snatched it from him, his whole posture radiating resentment and hostility. His gaze never left the Arbiter.

The Arbiter calmly loaded his carbine and stood waiting for orders.

In his normal silence, Master Chief turned and ran into the forest.

"Come on," Johnson gestured at the soldiers and Arbiter and followed the Chief.

"Wheesh!" Mark muttered as he fell into step beside Loren. "I wonder what made those two such great friends."

Loren said nothing, but concentrated on breathing and wondering how she had ever thought Johnson walked fast. She could see Master Chief ahead of her through the underbrush, running easily over the rough terrain and holding his weighty assault rifle as if it was a plastic toy.

The Arbiter loped a short distance behind him, contenting to remain visible. He evidently didn't want to make Master Chief feel more threatened than he already was. Though the Arbiter's face was mostly hidden by his armor, it seemed to Loren that he seemed continuously depressed. She wondered what had happened to make him this way; she knew it was not normal for an Elite, for all the others she had seen seemed full of energy and passion. If Master Chief had pointed a pistol at one of them, she was sure he would have been attacked on the spot. She just hoped that the Arbiter wasn't waiting to deal his revenge in secret.

Busy with her speculations, she didn't notice that the others had stopped and almost plowed into another Marine from behind. He threw her an amused glance, but before he could speak, Johnson called back in a hushed tone, "Covenant ahead."

Master Chief lifted his rifle and continued forward into a canyon, Arbiter at his side. They disappeared from sight and loud firing broke out.

"Loren, Mark, stay by me," Johnson called. "Let's kill us some Covenant, soldiers!"

The Marines cheered and charged forward after the Chief. They rounded a bend into a full blown battle. Grunts screamed and ran, brutes yelled, and Master Chief walked calmly through it all, the rapid sputtering of his rifle only pausing when he reloaded. The Arbiter waded through a group of petrified grunts, swinging his energy sword with reckless abandon.

"Loren, to your left!" Johnson yelled.

Loren spun around and reflectively fired as a jackal stepped into sight from behind a rock. The bullets caught the jackal with its shield down and blood flew. A grunt ran into her line of fire, firing its needler sporadically. She pulled the trigger again, and felt the weapon shake as it shot forth the projectiles of death. The bullets blew off the grunt's methane tank, and the grunt screamed as it fought against the oxygen invading its lungs. Loren emptied the rest of her clip into the grunt and stopped to reload.

"Watch it, Loren!" Mark gestured behind her frantically.

She twisted around to see a brute rise up behind her, a bloodied brute spiker in each hand. It stepped toward her laughing evilly, as she frenetically fumbled for her pistol.

"Taste death, helpless one," it leered, and pulled the trigger. Something shoved her hard into the ground, and the Arbiter sprang in front of her, his shield absorbing the brute spikes. He snarled as his shield gave out, and a spike punctured his armored gauntlet. Leaping forward, he slammed his sword into startled brute and jerked the brute spike out.

He turned back to her. "Never face one direction for too long, young one."

"Thanks," she managed, leaning back against a rock, trembling violently.

He clicked his mandibles in some strange alien gesture and turned back to the fight.

Mark clambered down some moss covered rocks to her side. "Are you okay?" he asked breathlessly. "I thought you were gone."

"Yes," she answered unsteadily, picking up her assault rifle and shoving in a fresh clip. "I'm fine, thanks to the Arbiter."

At that moment, Johnson appeared. "You alright, Loren? Good. Hurry up," he continued in one breath. "We're gonna get lifted to a new area. Chief and the Arbiter will take half the team and keep pushing back the brutes. We'll land a couple kilometers west of here and hit them from behind. We have to clear a landing zone. Stay close."

They broke into a jog and crossed a small stream, ducking an occasional stray projectile as the fight raged on ahead of them. They came upon the marines as the team was brought to a standstill. A Covenant Phantom swept low and deposited a fresh group of brutes and grunts below the falls. Master Chief stood knee deep in the river directly above the waterfall, his battle rifle rattling off short, controlled bursts as he fired down into the Covenant reinforcements.

To Loren's left, a brute stormed through the trees, grav hammer in hand, after the Arbiter who was picked off enemy snipers with his carbine. Adrenaline surged through Loren's veins, and she leaped after the brute, holding fire lest it activate its impenetrable shield. The Arbiter spun around as the brute entered the range of his radar and reached for his sword.

Roaring, the brute lifted the hammer high, as Loren scrambled over the last rock and smashed her rifle into the brute's back armor with all her might. The brute staggered and turned to face its new enemy. Loren shoved her assault rifle up into its face. "Farewell, ugly," she sneered, and emptied the clip.

Wiping the blue blood off her face, she looked up at the Arbiter. "Someone once told me never to face one direction for too long."

Something that could have been a smile passed over the Elite's armored face. "I stand corrected."

She grinned. "Keep killing those snipes â€" I'll cover your back."

Nodding, the Arbiter raised the carbine and snapped off another jackal sniper.

Loren spun to face the other direction and reloaded. She clipped the methane tank off another grunt and tossed a grenade after a brute. She smiled tightly as the grenade exploded and sent the brute's body

sailing through the air.

And then it was over.

Marines tended each others wounds and walked about, searching the casualties for the seriously injured. Any Covenant who showed signs of life was ruthlessly killed.

Throwing the Arbiter a farewell salute, Loren jogged over to where Johnson stood talking with someone on his helmet radio. "Loren Freswell reporting, sir."

He glanced up at her and raised his eyebrows, as if amused at what he saw. "Good," he said with his usual briskness. "Pelican's gonna be here in a few minutes. Mark's over there."

She saluted, a wave of post battle weariness striking her as the adrenaline rush trickled away. Walking over to where Mark sat with his back against a rock, she sank down beside him on the grass.

He looked at her and whistled, fishing a cloth out of his pocket. "Next time you shoot a brute at point blank range, try turning your face away."

She took the cloth and wiped her face with a sigh. "Point taken."

He glanced at her, a sparkled of admiration in his eyes. "That was brave, chasing that grav brute. You returned the favor and saved the Arbiter."

Loren snorted. "Oh, he could have handled it just fine." She leaned back against the rock and closed her eyes. "What I would give right now for a hot shower and a soft bed."

"And real food," Mark added.

"Yeah, that too," she murmured.

A roar overhead jerked her from her exhaustion.

"Pelican," Johnson shouted. "Load up!"

Loren forced herself to her feet and followed Mark down around the waterfall as the Pelican hovered over a massive cliff. Climbing into the ship, she plopped down in a seat. Mark sat down beside her and they fastened their seat belts. There were too many marines for seats, and five, including Johnson, remained standing, hanging onto handrails above their heads.

The pelican lifted off, as Master Chief and the Arbiter disappeared back into the jungle, still maintaining a respectful distance from each other.

Loren let the hum of the pelican lull her to sleep as they flew low over the tree tops, but scarcely had she surrendered to her weariness when something striking the craft and Johnson's voice woke her.

"Evasive! Go evasive!"

"I can't." Loren heard panic in the pilot's tone. "The controls are frozen."

Tree limbs snapped against the bottom of the craft, and the faces of the Marines paled.

"Hold on!" Johnson yelled. "Prepare for crash landing."

The pelican nosed down and crashed through the trees, banging its occupants from side to side. There was a sharp jolt and Loren's head snapped back against the seat, sending all into blackness.

****A/N: ****Well, first try at Halo. Sorry that the dialogue does not match the game completely. I was too lazy to play the first mission repeatedly until I learned it by heart. I'll try to post the second chapter in three days or so. It also might depend on how many reviews I get. Hint, hint. ;-)

2. Chapter 2 Allies to Friends

****Disclaimer:****Me? Own Halo?? Laughs

****Warnings: ****Uh, references to â€|

****A/N ****Once again, I am not word perfect in my following of the game. Ducks hail of plasma, bullets, s, etc. Sorry! Please enjoy! Oh, and Happy New Year!!

Chapter Two: Allies to Friends

"Chief, Chief?" Johnson swore, his voice bringing Loren back to consciousness. "Radio won't work."

"Commander, multiply hostiles closing in." That was Mark.

"Get her awake," Johnson commanded.

Loren pushed herself up into a sitting position; her head felt as if it would split. "I'm awake, sir," she mumbled, removing her helmet and rubbing the back of her head. Her brown, shoulder-length hair tumbled down in a snarled mess. Glancing around, she noticed that only ten other marines stood around them. "Where are the others?"

"They didn't survive the crash," Mark said quietly, kneel beside her and offering her a drink from his canteen.

A sick feeling settled over her, and she glanced at the pelican sitting at a crazy angle a short distance away. Johnson tossed her a battle rifle. She caught it and replaced the helmet.

"Come on," he exclaimed, getting to his feet. "We're sitting ducks in this gorge." The moment he rose to his full height, a carbine round scorched his left arm. Hissing something unpleasant, he dropped down to one knee. "They have us covered." Scarcely had the words left his mouth than an overwhelming crowd of Covenant appeared above and beside them.

A strange peaceful feeling passed over Loren as she sighted down the

scope and waited for orders. This was the end. She could see her in the ous eyes of every enemy, but she did not feel afraid. She was dieing for her people, her world, and the cause she believed in.

"For freedom!" she cried, and opened fire without waiting for Johnson. The other marines cheered and followed suit. She glanced at Johnson, and for a moment, their eyes met, and she saw approval and pride in his eyes.

Mark dropped prone beside her, a grim smile on his face as he rattled off rounds with his assault rifle. The Covenant, though at first surprised by resistance from such a small body of foes, opened up a ly crossfire, the marines succumbing to the merciless hail one by one.

Loren squeezed the trigger again only to latently realize that it was empty. She jerked a fresh clip out of her belt when a green plasma bolt smashed into her left shoulder.

Pain, searing pain. She cried out. The world hazed and spun. Her hand automatically went to the wound, but she jerked it away on contact, her charred, bleeding flesh protesting against the touch.

She saw Mark leaning over her, but pushed him away with a ied hand. "It's nothing," she gasped. "Just the shoulder. Fight on." A shadow fell over her, and Mark glanced up and let out a startled exclamation of fear before he mysteriously disappeared from sight.

"Mark!" she cried, shoving away the pain and reaching for her pistol. A large hand circled around her throat and lifted her up into the air. Gasping, she attempted to pry herself loose, but to no avail. She lifted her eyes to meet the yellow ones of an enormous, hideous brute. He sneered at her.

"Look, Dranmec," he exclaimed in guttural voice, "it's a female, and it's wounded."

"So what?" A tan colored brute in gold armor retorted, Mark struggling in its grasp. "Take them all. We'll play with a few and save the rest for the prophets."

Using all her remaining strength, Loren reached out and struck the brute with a vicious backhand, not caring that her knuckles struck armor. "I'm not an 'it!'" she snapped. "You are, you stupid, heartless, ing, brain-dead, cree â€"

The brute's fingers tightened and the words ended abruptly with a strangled rasp. "You're going to pay for that, human weakling," he hissed. He drew back a blue armo , and Loren winced, preparing for the coming blow, but the gold armored brute, Dranmec, grabbed his arm roughly.

"Save it, Senneron" Dranmec ordered. "We must leave here before the Demon and Heretic arrive." He tossed Mark over his shoulder like a sack of grain and jogged off.

Loren chanced a look around as Senneron debated whether or not to obey his leader's orders. Only four marines were left, all wounded in some form or fashion. Johnson sagged unmoving in the unmerciful grip

of another brute, but before Loren could discern whether or not he still lived, Senneron grabbed her legs and swung her over his shoulder. She loosed a small scream of pain, as her wounded shoulder slammed against his back armor.

Senneron chuckled evilly. "Such a harsh but beautiful sound, weakling. It will soon become the only thing that escapes your mouth."

Loren bit her lip and struggled to hold in tears. Her shoulder throbbed pitilessly, and her head pounded. She was going to die. She knew it. She closed her eyes and wished for the comfort of unconsciousness. An image of her parents flashed before her eyes.

_What would they think of me now? _She asked herself. They had been so proud when they enlisted, set on defending country and kin. Her father, Tim, was a retired military officer and her mother, Rachelle, was a lawyer. And Tina. Loren felt a flash of pain as the thought of her younger sister crossed her mind.

Tina had been heartbroken when Loren had announced her decision to give up college, where she was studying to be a Taxonomist, and join the marines. She remembered the arguments with acute pain, knowing that now, she would never be able to apologize to her sister.

Maybe Tina had been right. What could one do to help the cause? She killed a handful of enemies and now bounced around on the shoulder of a brute on her way to a hopefully quick . Sure, what _had_ she accomplished? Breaking her family's hearts, that was all. She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling the wetness on her long lashes and refusing to cry.

A falling sensation caused her eyes to snap open, and she screamed for real as the brute landed awkwardly on a cement lot, smashing her shoulder cruelly into the armor again.

"Oh, lookie!" a grunt exclaimed. "A human! Can I touch it?"

"Get out of the way," Senneron grunted, shoving the grunt aside.

"Nasty brute," the grunt complained. "Say 'scuse me."

Senneron spun towards the grunt, the sudden movement causing Loren to groan. "Listen, you," he snapped. "Shut up, or I'll kill you."

The grunt shrieked and ran.

Loren wanted to kill him. "Too cowardly to pick on someone your own size," she muttered.

Senneron stopped and held her upside-down in front of him by her legs. "Did you say something, human?"

She rushed dizzily to Loren's head, and she blinked. "No," she answered ly. "Why?"

Senneron cursed in a strange language and draped her over his shoulder again. He carried her into some building, some dam or other;

old factory maybe. She didn't care. He trotted across a narrow catwalk, confirming her idea of a dam, carbine wielding jackals eyeing the train of brutes and prisoners curiously.

Two grunts trailed Senneron, their conversation nearly driving Loren mad.

"Senneron, can I have it's helmet?" one cried.

"Look at the shiny thing around it's neck!" the other exclaimed. "I claim it! It's mine!"

Loren glanced down to see her dog tag had fallen out of her shirt and dangled down in front of her, the metal catching the sun.

The second grunt ran up and tried to grab it, but Loren hit it across the face and grabbed the dog tag, stuffing it back into her shirt.

"Cruel human!" the grunt shrilled angrily, reminding Loren of a spoiled child. "It hit me!"

"Touch me, and I'll rip you apart," Loren spat, knowing the threat was empty but not really caring.

"Save me, save me!" the grunt screeched and jumped behind the safety of a large storage crate. "It talked!"

Senneron entered a building and tossed Loren down in a corner. She landed on her good arm, but agony still shot through her other shoulder. Moaning softly, she pushed herself up to a sitting position and surveyed her surroundings. It was a small concrete building, empty except for several storage pods full of needlers and carbines. She eyed the weapons hungrily as Mark was thrown down beside her.

Senneron followed her gaze and laughed hoarsely. "Dream on, fool." He dropped an object on the floor, and a shield sprang into existence, stretching from wall to wall and locking Loren and Mark in the small end of the building.

Loren sighed and leaned back against the wall, chastising herself for even thinking that it would be that easy. "What's going to happen to us?" she asked Senneron.

The brute grinned, showing rows of crooked teeth. "Since you and the boy are in the best physical condition, you shall be taken with your," he paused for a moment, "sergeant," the strange word rolled thickly off his tongue, "to the Prophet of Truth."

"And the rest?" she asked, dreading the answer.

"They shall die," Senneron said with sickening anticipation. "They shall provide us with amusing entertainment."

Loren closed her eyes and, drawing her knees up to her chest, lowered her forehead onto her knees.

After a few moments, someone touched her arm. "I should try to bandage that wound, Loren," Mark said. His face was pale, and ran

freely down the left side of his face where he been clipped by a brute spiker.

She nodded wearily, and he unbuckled his armor and tore several strips off his shirt. Replacing the armor, he gently wrapped the strips around the burn. Tears of pain filled Loren's eyes, and she bit her lip until she tasted .

"Sorry," Mark muttered apologetically as he tied the strips in place. "I've never excelled at first aid."

That forced a sobbing laugh from her. "Oh!" she yelped with pain.

Mark jerked his hands back. "What?"

"No, not you," she gasped. "Laughing hurts."

"Maybe you should lie down," he suggested, leaning back against the wall and stretching out his legs in front of him. "Lie on your back and rest your head on my legs."

Normally, Loren would have smacked him for saying that, but now she was too tired to care and obediently complied. She let her eyes sink shut, too exhausted to worry about prophets and impending .

Scarcely had her eyes shut, when the sound of a scream jerked them back open.

The agonized scream came again, different this time, and followed by the coarse laughter of the brutes. "Human cowards!" a brute's voice drifted in through the open door and open windows; the shield did nothing to impede sound. "You cannot take a little pain, huh?"

"Leave them alone, you overweight creeps!" That was Johnson.

Loren clamped her eyes shut but still felt tears streaming down her cheeks as the brutes beat her fellow marines. Mark said nothing, but she could feel him shaking slightly as he struggled to contain his emotions.

The next few minutes seemed to last hours as the horrific sounds wafted in from outside. Some marines begged for mercy between cries, others cursed until their last breath, while still others made no noise. Even then, the sound of armor striking flesh and the of breaking bones signaled that the war was progressing. The brutes mocked the cries of pain and scorned the pleas for mercy.

Eventually, all fell silent, only to have the quiet disrupted by splashes.

"What is that?" Loren asked tremulously.

"The brutes are tossing the bodies into the river," Mark said bitterly.

"How can the Sergeant-Major stand it?" she murmured, feeling deep pity for Johnson.

Moments later, she got her answer. "You worthless, blasted, scum!" Johnson yelled with a long string of curses. There was a brief sound of a struggle, and abruptly, the sergeant-major flew backward through the door, a brute charging after him.

The brute grabbed him and lifted him up by the throat. "You will learn your place, human, or I shall remove your tongue." Dragging Johnson over to the shield, he deactivated it and tossed him inside before reactivating it and storming from the building.

Johnson pushed himself into a sitting position and leaned back against the wall, heaving a heavy sigh. He closed his eyes and hung his head, his whole posture radiating defeat and sorrow.

It hurt Loren to see her normally gruff, vivacious sergeant so crushed and grief-stricken. "Are you alright, sir?" she asked, hesitant to disturb him but anxious to know.

He raised opened his eyes, which were filled with unshed tears. "Yes," he said, forcing a small smile. "I am fine."

"We will all be fine," Mark said firmly. "Master Chief will free us." Scarcely had the words left his mouth, then loud firing broke out. "See?" he said triumphantly.

The prisoners waited tensely as the sound of the fighting drew nearer, the rattling of a battle rifle echoing over the noise of plasma and carbine rounds. Suddenly, a brute roared and there was the distinct of a grav hammer.

Johnson winced. "I hope Chief hasn't bitten off more than he can chew."

"The Arbiter's with him," Loren murmured, her eyes sinking shut despite her effort to keep them open.

"I wouldn't trust that alien as far as I could throw him," Johnson grunted. "Which, admittedly, is not far."

Loren ed an eye open and glared at him the best she could with one eye open. "I believe in him," she said defensively. "I kinda like him, too."

Johnson gave a longsuffering sigh. "Trust that alien race to worm their way through our defenses by charmin' the women."

Loren reached over and smacked him weakly on the leg, not caring that it was insubordinate. "You are too suspicious," she chided. "Though he and Master Chief aren't that fond of one another, he has no malice in him that I can see."

"Beware," Mark said, mockingly solemn, "of the great Loren Freswell. Her piecing eyes can read intentions and emotions into one's very soul â€" Ouch!"

This time Mark received a shaky backhand. "Do be quiet," Loren retorted, her voice slightly slurred with pain though her eyes were amused.

He looked down at her worriedly, alarmed by the fresh anguish in her

tone. However, before he could speak, a blue armored brute rushed into the building. Splotches of a bluish-purple liquid covered its armor and brown skin, and it had a pronounced limp. It snarled fully as it approached, almost seeming to laugh crazily.

It clutched a brute spiker in one ied hand and reached for the controls for the energy shield. "Time to die, humans," it sneered. Abruptly, it gasped, the ragged breath hissing strangely through the face armor. Two pointed s of white-blue light gleamed through its chest, piecing the armor easily. The brute attempted to look over its shoulder, but the Arbiter stepped forward, shoving the energy blade deeper into the brute's body.

"You predict your own , traitor," the elite hissed. "Yet the gods have foretold it since the beginning of your betrayal."

The brute's eyes glazed, and its body when limp. With a short, sharp gesture, the Arbiter withdrew his sword and kicked the body aside, deactivating his sword. His gaze rested for on Loren a moment, and she smiled. "I knew you would come," she said softly.

The fire in the dark, alien eyes calmed somewhat, and he stepped forward only to jump hastily backward as Master Chief dropped from a skylight in the ceiling. The green armored figure landed gracefully in a crouch as glass rained down on him. Straightening, he reached for the controls and released the shield.

Johnson was on his feet in a moment. "Took you long enough," he shot at the Chief as he headed over to the Covenant supply crates. Grinning gleefully, he hefted a needler and darted out the door as a two phantoms swept in. "Come, Covies, come!"

"Go with your sergeant," the Arbiter told Master Chief tersely. "I will guard the wounded."

For a moment, the Spartan tensed, and his masked gaze settled on the Arbiter with a disturbing intensity. The Arbiter met his gaze unflinchingly, and for a moment, two great wills battled.

"Master Chief," Loren ventured. Two unreadable faces swiveled over to her, and she flinched slightly. "The Arbiter will keep us safe, sir. Just keep the Sergeant-Major from getting himself killed."

Though she could not see his face, Master Chief practically radiated doubt and distrust. He shifted uneasily, his gaze shifting from the Arbiter to Loren, before finally nodding slowly. Turning abruptly, he left the building after Johnson.

For a long moment, the Arbiter's gaze did not waver from Loren's, questions in his eyes.

An explosion of rapid firing caused them all to jump, and Mark sighed loudly. "Well, I think we should begin this odd friendship correctly by remaining alive 'til we can get back to base. Loren, can you stand?"

She blinked and glanced over at him. "I think so," she answered, holding her injured arm tightly to her chest and struggling to force her exhausted body to move.

To her surprise, a large gentle hand took her uninjured arm and helped her stand. The grey-blue armor felt smooth and warm as she grasped the Arbiter's wrist and pulled herself upward. "Thanks," she said, leaning hard against the wall, another grin lighting her face despite the pain and dizziness.

The Arbiter nodded slightly and offered a hand to Mark. He took it after a moment's hesitation and pulled himself to his feet with a wry smirk. "You aren't half so bad," he muttered, relieving one of the supply crates of a brute spiker.

An expression that must have been a smile flashed a swiftly vanishing path across the Arbiter's face. "Neither are you, _human_," he said with a certain degree emphasis on the last word.

"Nope," Mark said, peering out one of the windows. "We're pretty civilized." Knocking out the glass, he fired and watched with fascination as the brute spiker's needles exploded on a jackal, bursting its shield and downing the creature. "Watch the door, will ya, _elite_?"

The Arbiter seemed to ponder the term for a moment before clicking his jaws in a way that Loren was beginning to interpreting as acknowledgement and heading for the door, energy sword exchanged for a plasma rifle.

Loren leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes, trusting her two friends to keep her safe. _Friends_ She could not help but smile. Friends with an elite, the Arbiter himself, no less. She didn't even want to know what her sister would say to _that_.

"Yahoo!" Mark yelled suddenly, jarring her eyes open. "Calvary's here!"

His words were punctuated by a series of earsplitting blasts as the rockets of a pelican smashed into the two phantoms, destroying them in identical orange fireballs of molten metal.

"Come," the Arbiter said urgently, "we must go. Your ship will take us."

Mark stepped up and wrapped his arm around Loren's waist to help her walk, still holding the brute spiker precariously in one hand. "You gotta try one of these sometime," he said, eyeing the weapon lovingly. "It's awesome."

"Sure, sometime," Loren mumbled, grimacing as waves of agony pelted against her consciousness. Everything swam before her, and Mark swept her up in his arms, reluctantly dropping the brute spiker. "You aren't walking," he told her plainly, as she struggled slightly, "and unless you feel like getting dragged, I suggest you let me carry you."

Flushing and sending him a dirty look, she ceased her resistance. They exited the building into the warm sunlight which caressed Loren's face warmly and sparkled on the water with life and energy. A bird sang its sweet song nearby in a tree, seeming not to notice the scene of carnage near it.

Mark and the Arbiter maneuvered their way around lifeless alien corpses, and Loren closed her eyes tightly against the sight and smell. The horrific scene bothered her more than she cared to admit, even if it was the Covenant who lay . Her growing friendship with the Arbiter had subconsciously begun to cool her hatred of the enemy. She realized that they were not the mindless killers she had been taught they were but merely deceived and helpless to see through the deception of their prophets.

The wine of a pelican and a mix of voices pulled her from her thoughts, and she opened her eyes. Mark's breathing became labored as they approached the rescue ship, and Loren squinted up at him worriedly. He sent her a reassuring smile, but it looked strained.

Johnson and Master Chief were waiting beside the hovering pelican, and the sergeant major gestured at them sharply. "Hurry, Covenant reinforcements are on the move."

Mark's breath hitched, and Loren felt him stumble. She shrieked as he dropped down on one knee, gasping for air.

"I'm alright," he panted before she could ask and pushed himself back to his feet.

"Put me down," Loren said, squirming slightly. "You're going to drop me."

"I will not," he retorted, ignoring the disbelieving glance she sent him.

Nevertheless, she stopped fighting him and let him take the last few trembling steps to the pelican. Abruptly, he staggered again, but the Arbiter reached quickly over and steadied him.

Sending the elite a thankful glance, Mark handed Loren to a rather surprised Master Chief. "See," he said faintly, grinning at her, "I didn't drop ya." Then his eyes closed, and he slumped to the ground.

"Mark!" Loren cried tensing to begin a fresh struggle against the arms which held her, but Johnson flashed her a look, and she remained still.

The sergeant knelt beside the still form and checked for a pulse. At last, he looked up. "He's just unconscious. His head wound is more serious than I thought."

Loren let out a breath she didn't realize she had been holding and relaxed in Master Chief's strong arms. "Please," she murmured, "can we go?"

Master Chief nodded and gently lifted her up into the pelican. She slumped in a seat gratefully, letting the fingers of her right hand, trace across the familiar surface. She forced her weary eyes to remain open as Mark was lifted up and placed in a seat across from her. Johnson pulled himself up next and set to tending the young man with a rough tenderness.

Master Chief jumped in followed shortly after by the Arbiter, and the

Pelican lifted off. Loren sent them both a weak but genuine smile, and the Arbiter sat next to her.

"How do you feel?" he asked unexpectedly.

She blinked at him in groggy surprise. "I've been better," she admitted. "But thanks to you both, I'll live."

He was silent for a moment, yet she could tell that something was bothering him. "Why do you trust me?" he asked, his voice so quiet Loren had to strain to hear it over the roar of the Pelican.

She clutched her left arm absently, the pain dulling as she pondered the question. "I do not know," she answered finally. "I just do." She glanced up at him and added softly, "I don't know what you've been through, but I know that you want to stop this fighting as much as I do, and I'm thankful for that. The very least I can do is trust you." A slight smile broke through the seriousness on her face. "You will always have a friend in Loren Freswell."

The Arbiter dipped his head. "Thank you," he replied, dark eyes flashing a brief glimpse of appreciation.

She returned the nod and let her eyelids sink shut. With a deep sigh, she surrendered to the restful darkness of unconsciousness, feeling safer and more secure than ever before.

As her body relaxed, her head slumped to the side to rest on the Arbiter's shoulder armor. He looked slightly surprised but did not move and silently allowed himself to be her temporary pillow. He glanced up to meet the gaze of Master Chief who had seated himself across from the two.

After a moment of hesitation, the Spartan leaned forward and held out his hand.

Wordlessly, the elite reached out and shook it.

"Finish the fight?" Master Chief asked, his armored fingers clasped in the Arbiter's.

The Arbiter nodded. "Finish the fight."

End

****A/N ****There it is! Hope you all liked it. I would love to make it longer and write in my real style instead of this hurried one, but I don't have the time. Maybe someday I'll lengthen it. Please review! I'd love to hear from you, even if it is just one word. Thanks for reading!

End
file.